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Statement submitted by Associated Country Women of the World, Global Fund for Widows, Gray Panthers, Guild of Service, HelpAge International, Mother's Union, National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales, Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Memorial Foundation, The Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) Limited, Tandem Project, The Widows Rights International and Widows for Peace through Democracy, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Widows the world over suffer from obscurity. They are often hidden due to traditional taboo. As a result, they are often unsupported.

Lack of statistics, disaggregated by marital status, has led to a dearth of data on widows and female headed households. The priority theme provides a timely opportunity to raise awareness of the situation of widows around the world. If Agenda 2030 aims to leave no one behind, the plight of widows has to be understood and overcome. Thus, the review theme also needs to highlight widowhood in all its forms.

It is imperative that widows are not only considered victims and survivors of the many types of abuse and disadvantage they suffer, but also as potential protagonists for positive change. Examples in Rwanda, Kenya, India, Nepal, Uganda and Tanzania attest to the positive force that widows can have within communities when their situation is understood, and they are empowered to take steps to change their lives for the good.

It is evident that women and girls, throughout their life cycle and whatever their background, are in need of access to good education, social protection and decent work. Due to harmful traditional practices and age-old attitudes to widows, this group is often the most in need and the least recognised. They need to be protected from all the ills of poverty and marginalisation including violence and all forms of deprivation.

With new conflicts ever beginning, and continuing, around the world, it is inevitable that there will be an increase in widows. Any type of turmoil leads to families attempting to safeguard their daughters, often with the miss-placed belief that marriage will protect them. With early and forced marriage, girls not only lose their childhood, but with conflict and disruption, they also face the disadvantage of widowhood.

It is imperative that The Commission on the Status of Women 63 results in Agreed Conclusions that ensure robust provision for widows in terms of social protection, pensions, social security, access to justice, in addition to being recognised as potential positive change agents.

If widows continue to be neglected, with the increase of children of widows who themselves are, generation after generation, more disadvantaged than their peers, poverty and inequality of women and girls will be exacerbated.

The children of war rape are recognised as a demographic ripe for radicalisation who feel completely disenfranchised by society. This is also the case for the children of widows. If neglected, widowhood is a root cause of poverty across the generations and impedes peace and prosperity for the whole community.

Pensions

Few middle and low-income countries (LMICs) and fragile conflict afflicted states (FACs) have a system of universal pensions and social protection providing a safety net for widows of all ages.

Literature and research on widowhood, often looking at the global north, focuses predominantly on older widows, and ignores the plight of younger bereaved women and girls.

Even in so called developed countries, older widows may be dependent on state pensions. The value of which has dropped dramatically leaving them in poverty

including that of isolation and lack of respect. With austerity, many services that might assist them such as health, recreation, home care, and so on, have been cut.

The majority of state pension systems depend on contributions from those working in the formal sector. Many women working in the informal sector are therefore ineligible in this framework. A system that takes into account the work of women in other sectors needs to be strengthened to assist widows of all ages.

The procedures for applying for state pensions often disadvantage widows, as they may depend on formal documentation, birth, marriage and death certificates that are often absent for these women. Long distances to government offices, difficulty in completing forms and challenges of communicating with strangers outside their villages deter many from seeking pensions.

In India, where there is a universal pension scheme, the provision is of sums so low that some widows, if aware of these benefits and able to access them, do not find the process worth following. In many cases, there is a need for a male relative to undertake the task to obtain the pension, which creates an opportunity for manipulation.

We urge Member States to agree to ensure robust and accessible pensions for widows.

Harmful traditional practices

Widows have inheritance and other rights in many countries. However, their lived reality is that patriarchal discrimination results in the denial of their rights to inheritance, land, property, access to justice and protection from harmful traditional practices (HTPs).

They are stigmatised and therefore exposed to multiple forms of violence. They can be forced into high-risk economic exploitation such as modern-day domestic, agricultural or sexual slaves, often coerced into begging and prostitution. Effective social protection mechanisms and services should eliminate such survival measures. It is unacceptable that prostitution can be considered appropriate work for any disadvantaged woman. Thus far social protection measures have failed to protect widows.

Young Widows

In most countries, social protection mechanisms do not provide for child or young widows. They are unable to access pensions due to age and there are often few other social protection measures in place to assist them. They are thus denied full access to education or child care and they are often left widows having to provide for children, when they themselves are still children. This results in vulnerability leading to violence and exploitation.

Work of Non-governmental Organisations

There are positive examples of non-governmental organisations assisting widows in accessing any social support, benefits or services available, by assisting with relevant documentation. For example, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has enabled widows to secure life insurance, health care, scholarships for education, legal aid, and so on. This work has seen a decline in widows begging, daughters withdrawn from school for early marriage, and in prostitution.

When widows can work together in their own organisations, it has been found to have profound effects not only on the widows themselves and their families, but the community as a whole. We therefore ask Member States to ensure robust funding for organisations for and run by widows themselves to ensure their voices are heard and heeded and their unique perspective can provide new understanding and solutions.

Data

It is evident that absence of accurate data prevents widows from accessing what social support exists. We ask Member States to ensure robust data is collected on all aspects of widowhood. When considering this issue, it is important to note the highly effective gathering of grass roots data by NGOs such as Women for Human Rights Single Women's Group in Nepal and Naserian in Tanzania.

Conclusion

If we are seeking a peaceful and prosperous world for all, it is incumbent on States Parties, United Nations Agencies and all civil society including business, academia and non-governmental organisations, to ask ourselves questions regarding the most disadvantaged in society. When we seek to raise awareness of one group, how can we ensure that we do not prioritise their rights over others? How can we ensure that we have real information about those most disadvantaged? Where does that information come from? How can we ensure that the solutions proposed do not have an unforeseen adverse consequence?

In regard to widows of all ages, backgrounds, cultures and countries, it is clear that there is need for more awareness of their situation. It is also the case that by enabling widows, often the most disadvantaged in a community, the whole community benefits. There is evidence that to find the most diverse range of accurate information, it is imperative to get this from the widows themselves. Good examples highlight that finding accurate data can be achieved by working with widows' organisations with a local base. Widows organisations provide an uplifting example of resilience from which we can all benefit.

We ask the Commission on the Status of Women 63 to ensure the concerns and requests of widows are included in the Agreed Conclusions so they too can realise their potential and play their part in creating the prosperous and peaceful world that all noble hearted people long for.